

Transcript for **Working with Stress**

Serious Risk (*episode 1*)

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It's been said that a job without frustrations is not a job. All workers will face occasional frustrations on the job, but it's also true that most workers enjoy a good challenge and the satisfaction that comes with mastering a job. Challenging work motivates us to learn new skills and perform to our potential.

But what happens when job demands become excessive? When pressure builds and healthy challenge is replaced by frustration and exhaustion?

Stress takes over. It can become a daily threat to health and well-being. Stress increases the risk of illness, injury, and job burn-out and unlike other occupational hazards nearly the entire working population can be affected. Most studies show that one-fourth to one-third of today's workers report high levels of stress at work.

The latest research tells us that job stress plays a major role in many chronic health problems, and the evidence is growing. Now more than ever, it's time to learn what can be done to relieve a workforce under stress.

Hello, I'm Ann Reskin for the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Fortunately, for those of us who work for a living, research on job stress has expanded greatly in recent years. Such research has been furthered by a relatively new field of study known as occupational health psychology. Even so, confusion still remains about the causes and effects of job stress and how to prevent it. For example, there's the question of whether stress is a product of poor coping skills or the work environment itself. We'll be taking a look at this issue as well as the physical and psychological effects of job stress. And we'll discuss some practical methods to minimize this growing occupational hazard and help ensure a healthy and productive workforce.

Clinically speaking, job stress is a set of harmful physical and psychological responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker.

The response to stressful conditions is triggered by the brain, which prepares the body for defensive action. Signals are sent to the body to sharpen the senses, increase pulse, deepen respiration, and tense the muscles. The response is preprogrammed biologically and is known as the fight or flight response. Occasional episodes of stress are normal and pose little danger because the body returns to equilibrium after the stress passes. But when stressful situations persist, the body is kept in a constant state of activation. This prolonged response results in fatigue or damage to the body. It can no longer repair and defend itself as before. As a result, the risk of disease and injury escalates. In fact, health care expenditures are nearly 50% greater for workers who report high levels of stress. It's now widely believed that job stress increases the risk of cardiovascular disease, certain psychological disorders, and musculoskeletal disorders of the back and upper extremities. Stress may also exacerbate existing health problems and interfere with their treatment.

In terms of safety, stressful working conditions may interfere with safe work practices and other precautions, leaving the worker more susceptible to hazards in the workplace.

Given these health effects, it's no wonder that job stress is strongly associated with health complaints. More so than even financial or family problems according to one study.

It is widely accepted that job stress results from the interaction of the worker with the conditions of the work environment.

However, opinions differ on the primary sources of job stress. Some studies have shown that personal and situational factors, such as personality, coping skills, and attitude influence stress will develop on the job. This point of view has given rise to stress management education, health promotion, and other workplace programs designed to help the worker cope with demanding conditions.

Other studies place more emphasis on working conditions as a key source of job stress. Because evidence suggests that certain working conditions such as heavy workload demand are stressful to most types of people most of the time. NIOSH believes the first line of defense against job stress is to design jobs in a way that avoid these conditions.

Thus, the NIOSH model of job stress looks like this: Stressful working conditions lead to risk of injury and illness. Conditions that commonly lead to stress include unrealistic deadlines and workloads, lack of control over the working environment, lack of supervisory support, and poorly defined work roles. The effects of stressful conditions can be modified by certain personal and situational factors as illustrated. Some personal and situational factors can reduce the impact of stressful conditions on safety and health. These factors may include a balance between work and personal life, supportive co-workers, and a relaxed and positive outlook. On the other hand, personal and situational factors can also intensify the effect of stressful conditions. Thereby increasing the risk of stress related health problems. For example family, problems or unhealthy behaviors such as inadequate sleep, diet or physical activity.

Nearly half of all large companies provide some type of stress management training to their employees. These programs usually teach workers about the causes and effects of stress and skills such as time management and relaxation. Because stress management programs are generally inexpensive and easy to implement, they continue to receive wide corporate support. While such programs are indeed beneficial at least in the short term they don't address the root causes of stress because they focus on the worker, not the environment. As the stress model we've just seen suggests, the most direct way to prevent stress is to improve working conditions.